

Expecting Easter
John 20:1-18
April 8, 2007 – Easter Sunday
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The word “expectation” is a word full of meaning in the Christian faith. Dictionary.com defines “expectation” as “the act or state of looking forward to or expecting.” That certainly describes what we experience during the season of Advent, which directly precedes Christmas Day. We move through Advent with the expectation of Christ’s birth.

Expectation also plays a role during the season of Lent. As we journey to the cross, we anticipate and expect the joy of the resurrection. Even as we endure the darkness of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we know that there is still reason to hope, and that keeps us expectant, even in the face of such brutality and violence.

But in this morning’s reading, we hear about a different kind of expectation. I don’t think we can completely grasp it, because we know the end of the story. We know the answer to the riddle with which Mary is confronted. But imagine what our expectations would be if we didn’t know that.

What would you do if you woke up one morning, and what you expected to be there wasn’t there? That’s happened to me. When I was in seminary in Indianapolis, Leigh and I lived close to a not-so-nice part of town. I never really paid much attention to that until one morning when I walked out to my car. I went to unlock it and saw that the lock had been popped out of the door. Uh-oh. I opened the door – no need to unlock it now! – and saw the dome light had been broken. Double uh-oh. Sure enough, the only thing in that old car worth more than a quarter, the car stereo, was missing. They even took the change from my ashtray. That’s not how I expected my morning to start. If you have ever had something stolen from you, you know the feeling of expecting one thing, but instead finding something very different.

That’s how Mary must have felt as she made her way to the tomb this morning. John tells us she went to the tomb, but I would have to think “trudged to the tomb” would be a better description. This was not a happy walk to make. Mary wasn’t expecting to find what she found. She was expecting death, plain and simple. She went out expecting that today would be exactly like yesterday. She went out expecting that Jesus’ body was going to be in the same place it was left. She wasn’t expecting Easter.

Are we? Are we expecting Easter? Of course we are, in a way. We may not know what day it falls on each year, but we know it’s going to happen. Happens every year. This is my 36th year of living, and it’s my 36th Easter. I think I’ve got it pretty much down pat by now; I imagine you have, as well. It’s almost old news, isn’t it? We’ve heard it so many times that we probably don’t even hear it anymore. We hear, “Early in the morning on the first day of the week...” and we start thinking about what’s for lunch. “And then she turned around and saw Jesus standing there...” I wonder if we’re having mashed potatoes?

Why listen? Don’t we know this story? Hasn’t this story been retold countless times in a zillion ways? TV news specials and popular books and magazine covers. Do I know the Bible? Of course I do! I’ve seen “Jesus Christ Superstar” and rented “The Passion of the Christ” – twice! I know this story. I know what to expect on Easter. Stone

rolled away. Empty tomb. I wonder if we'll have ham or turkey? Strips of linen. Angels in white. Risen Jesus. Yawn.

The problem is if we think we know this story, if we've experienced it more than a few times, we run the risk of thinking that tomorrow is going to be like yesterday. And we run the risk of leaving this place today the same person we were when we came in. We have the perspective of 2000 years of knowledge, history and tradition. Has that dulled our understanding of the magnitude of this day? Do we dare peer into the empty tomb once again and miss what has taken place?

This is not just another day. This day is fundamentally different than the other 364. And it changes every day that is to come after it. We are not the same people today that we were yesterday. We can't say what the cynic once said: "I've seen the future and it's like the present, only longer." Because of what has happened this morning, life is no longer the same.

What has been done is simply this: Jesus has conquered death. It's a basic statement, one we've heard many times before. But have you stopped and thought about what it means? Life is no longer the same because death is no longer the same.

When I was a kid I had a room in the basement of our house, so it got very dark down there. And when it was raining out and the wind was blowing, my little imagination would start running wild and I'd conjure up all kinds of creepy-crawlies that were waiting in there to bite my toes and suck out my brain. So I'd have someone check it out for me first. They'd go in and flip on the light, open the closet, look under the bed, and then say, "It's safe. You can go in now. No creepy-crawlies."

Death evokes that same kind of fear in us, but we can't have someone go first and report back. "You know, I died last week, wasn't all that bad." Jeanne Oehring, who just passed away, promised me she'd come back and update me if she could, but I haven't heard from her yet. Once we enter that room, we're not coming out again. Death is scary to us, and we have no way of knowing that everything will be all right.

That's what Jesus has done for us today. He has gone before us into the darkest of dark places, looked around, and said, "It's safe. You can go in now. I have gone before you." Jesus victory over death empowers us to face all of life's uncertainties, even the biggest uncertainty of all.

But here's the paradox of faith: Jesus has removed the uncertainty of death, but I have no certainty about how he did it. I can't explain it to you. If you've come today expecting that kind of answer, you're going to go away disappointed. I can't pull out an anatomy book and take you through the process of a body coming back to life. I don't have a videotape to show you, or an eyewitness who saw it happen. There's no explanation for what has happened today.

But I don't think that's such a bad thing. Faith ceases to be faith when it can be explained. When we're simply at a loss for words to explain something, God has us right where he wants us, because it's at that point we have to leave reason behind and enter into faith. How did Jesus conquer death? I don't know. But I have faith that he did.

And that's the danger of coming to the Easter morning thinking you know what's going to happen. For our faith to be alive and kicking, there has to be room for mystery, room for God's spirit to move around. If we could prove God's love in a lab, it wouldn't be the ultimate life-changing force that it is. There will always be something unexplainable about Easter.

What we know is that Jesus died on the cross so that we would know how much God loves us. What we know is that Jesus was resurrected, and through his resurrection, we have been given the gift of eternal life. Those things are to be expected. But what we don't know is what that's going to look like in our life from this day forward.

You see, each year we come to Easter in need of resurrection. Something in us has died this past year – a dream of a better job, a hope for restored health, the strength to face a challenge in front of us, the desire for a restored relationship, the longing for a deeper faith. For whatever reason, something in our lives has died. Have we come here today expecting those things to stay dead? Or are we expecting God to do something new? A resurrected Savior is one that can bring dead things back to life. And every Easter there's something within us that needs to be resurrected.

After today, we simply cannot go back to life as usual. We can no longer give in to the usual disappointments, the usual discouragement, the usual defeatism. If we truly believe that Christ has risen from the dead, then our lives should show evidence of that belief. Our Savior is alive! If someone were to ask you how you know that's true, what evidence would you offer? What would you point to in your life that shows the resurrection is real?

You know, I thought I knew what to expect today. Same old stories in the newspaper about death and destruction. Same old fears and doubts floating around in my head. I thought today was going to be the same as yesterday. I expected lots of people and a bunch of lilies. But then I heard this story, old but somehow new, about an empty tomb and a risen Christ, and I realized: nothing will ever be the same. I don't know how, but God is going to do something new. Something that I thought was dead is going to be resurrected. I know that now. When I came here today, I was expecting it would be Easter, but I wasn't expecting that. Are you?